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Buenos Aires

Yes, we got married, but it took us 3 days to overcome some unforeseen obstacles. But later about that. First let us talk about that beautiful city called Buenos Aires. The name means "Good Aires" but frankly during the twenty years I lived there, it was mostly very hot and humid. Six months summers where the thermometer oscillates between 88 and a 100 degrees and 90 to 95 % humidity, hardly any spring or fall and the winters very mild. Never any snow or ice, but it seems colder because of the high humidity. In 1938 the city had about three and a half million inhabitants. Being at sealevel with no mountains for hundreds of miles, the city grew over the years and to-day five and a half million people live there. Argentina is almost as large as the USA, but has a population of only twenty eight million people. The Rio de la Plata, "River of Silver" on whose shores the city was built is wider than long and seems to be the ocean, but it is sweetwater and many rivers form the delta. Buenos Aires has wide, treelined avenues and prides itself of having the widest avenue, but it is also the shortest, because the city ran out of money. The center of the city has narrow streets, arranged in a grid, small houses, interspersed with some large hotels. As the city is built on the sands of the delta, there is only one skyscraper of sixty-four floors. And does it sway! Lining the avenues are twelve story buildings, all have thick walls to keep the heat out and large heavy windowshutters. When we left in 1958 there was no air-conditioning in private homes and in most houses no heat. We had kerosene stoves and later gas heaters. I love Buenos Aires with its wide-open spaces, evergreen trees and beautiful flowers and I loved the people. Forty percent of the population is of Spanish descent, forty percent of Italian and the rest is a mix of many nationalities. Argentina, like the USA got many immigrants from Europe. It has a small American Indian population, few of which live in the cities, and no Blacks. During the twentieth century the political situation was very insecure. One coup after another, mostly military, but we got used to them. The years under Peron and Evita were quiet years.

In 1938, women had still a very different role in society than what we Europeans were used to. Few worked, as it would that their husbands could not provide for them and their macho image would suffer, Girls as well as married women had to go out in pairs. Restaurants, coffee houses, even movie houses were partitioned off for women only, so they would not be molested. All this tells a lot about the hot-blooded Latin men.

Now lets get back to the difficulties of getting married...

Hans, my fiancé, apologized profusely for having doubted his love for me. It was the journey, the loneliness in a strange country, the uncertainty of my joining him there, etc., etc., etc. I believed him because I wanted to.

Immediately after leaving the ship, Hans took me to the rooming house where we would live. It was a large apartment with rooms around a patio. They had only doors and

no windows, but an opening above the door for ventilation. One bathroom for six rooms, cold water only, but as I soon found out, a lot of bedbugs and cockroaches. They come in all sizes and colors, from brown to black. The big, black roaches were the worst. For a long time, I was afraid to walk into a dark room. To get rid of the bedbugs we would set the legs of the bed in small bowls of kerosene. Every few weeks we took the bedframes out to the patio and with a lit candle burned out the corners where they had their nests. It was certainly the worst thing that I had ever seen in my sheltered life. In Vienna we lived in

We left my two suitcases in those luxurious quarters and went to the Office of the Jewish Agency, which was supposed to help us. After listening to our problem and looking at my papers, they found an unexpected new one. As I was twenty years old and a minor, my father had me declared of age before we left Vienna. In Europe twenty-one years is that date, but in South America it is twenty-two. I would need my parent's authorization to get married. I had to get around that and so I declared that I did not know the whereabouts of my parents, which under the circumstance was palusible. The office — 58 sent us to the Surrogate Court, as I was to become a ward of the court. The judge agreed to see us the next day and he would decide if we could get married. I was ready to fall on my knees and throw myself at the mercy of the court. Through an interpreter, I started to explain my story. The judge smiled at me and wanted to hear all the details and I told him the whole story. He sat up in his chair, his smile faded and looked angrily at me. After all, I had broken the law. When I started to cry he became magnanimous and signed the papers. I was tempted to kiss him and by the way, he looked at me, he would not have minded. It was my first experience of what women could do with hot-blooded Latin men.

In South America, one has to have a civil marriage first and then, if desired a religious one. It is not performed by the same person as in the United States. So off we went to get a date for our civil wedding as soon as possible.

Every girl has dreams of her wedding day. The white beautiful dress, the bridesmaids and ushers, walking on her father's arm up the aisle, the crying mother, all friends and family present to share that memorable and so important moment in her life. Hitler has robbed me of many tangible things and he robbed me of the emotional ones too.

Dreaming is one thing, but the reality was so very different... It was a dingy office, the official a sour looking man, our interpreter and two witnesses were present and within five minutes we were married... I did not get a wedding band, because we could not afford one. The witnesses were the former girlfriend of my husband and her sister. Life is cruel and I was too proud to show how miserable I was.

But let's go on dreaming, after the wedding ceremony the reception, dancing, picture taking, happiness all around... After that, you leave for a Honeymoon.

Reality: We took a bus to our luxurious quarters and had a cup of coffee the landlady had prepared to mark the occasion. To start our marital life on the right foot Hans gave me his dirty laundry which he has saved for two weeks. There were no

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washing machines and the wash was done by hand, using a board and I had never learned how to do it. Result: I put a navy shirt into the white wash and Hans had to wear stained underwear for a long time. My knuckles started to bleed from the board and I was crying. Furthermore I had never ironed a shirt and it took five attempts to do the first one, but I learned fast. It was a rough beginning of our marriage.

It had taken three days to get married and we had to inform the captain. The next morning we went to the harbor. He congratulated us, hugged me and was very upset when heard about our living conditions. It had never occurred to him that after saving their lives many refugees had nothing left to live. We had the most wonderful lunch with him and were grateful for it. It was the last time I saw him. The next time the ship anchored in Buenos Aires we found out that he had been transferred, then came the war and no more ships arrived from Europe.

Let me introduce my husband to you. Hans was an only child born after fifteen years of marriage and was very spoiled. His father disliked him as he disliked everybody else. He was a tall, gaunt, good-looking man and he married a small pudgy, not very good-looking, but very rich girl. They produced a handsome, charming, witty son with whom I fell in love. As far as his mother was concerned he could do no wrong and his father never wanted to be bothered by him. After his father had invested his wife's dowry and lost it at the beginning of WWI, he started a factory and became very wealthy. So Hans lived the good life, as so many son's of rich father's do.

I was seventeen years old when I met him in 1935 at a scout get-together. I was a very shy and insecure girl and was overwhelmed that a young man of twenty was interest in me. My father was very strict and Hans had to come to the house to be "inspected" before I was allowed to go out with him. Hans had started to study medicine, but like everything else, he did not take it seriously. It was already the time when Jewish students had difficulties at the University and any excuse was good enough for him. My father did not like this attitude and considered him not serious and certainly not good enough for his beloved daughter. To his daughter it seemed so romantic and I was so proud to have been chosen to receive the attentions of a man of the world. Naturally, our relationship was not always smooth as many other girls also attracted his attention, but he always convinced me that for him I was special.

Unencumbered from responsibilities our friendship continued, but I doubt that we would have gotten married under normal circumstances. After Hitler rose to power in Germany many people married for the wrong reasons. They were afraid to start a new life alone in a strange country and many of these marriages ended in divorce. In a way Hans married me to save me from being taken back to Austria, we were both very young, spoiled and not prepared for the difficulties which awaited us.

When I finally got to the USA in 1960, many people compared the depression years to our experiences. Both were very difficult times, but very different. Ours was not only the monetary loss but we lost everything. Home, family friends country, all familiar surroundings. If we were lucky, we ended up in a strange country without family or friends, not knowing the language or customs, burdened with terrible memories and the uncertainty if our loved ones were still alive and safe.

The most important thing was to find work. Hans had sold the jewelry that his mother had given him to tie him over and he had not been looking for work since he arrived. We had to learn Spanish as fast as possible. In the United States, there were night schools to help the immigrants, not so in Argentina. A week after I arrive, I found a job as a maid in a big house with many floors, which I had to scrub. Argentinians are very kind people and my bosses liked me, but scrub I did. Hans found a job at the harbor, supervising the unloading of timber. We were certainly not prepared for this kind of life, were very tired and upset about everything. We were victims, persecuted for being Jewish and our feelings revolted against it. Little did we know how lucky we were to have escaped.

We had very little money, could not cook where we lived and ate in cheap restaurants near the meat markets looking up the meal menu in a dictionary. The heat and the unfamiliar food got to us. Four weeks later I got sick and had to leave my job. It was a lucky break.

In Vienna, I had learned to make hats and I found a job with a very lovely woman, who had a hat shop in her house. She was a wonderful person and took the situation in hand. Every morning one of her maids served us a luscious breakfast, around 11 o'clock she would come downstairs and study Spanish with me while I was making hats. Then came a big meal for lunch and before I left she would send down a carepackage to take home.

The news from Europe was getting worse, both of our parents were still there and so were many of our relatives. Cristall night had happened while I was on board ship and more people we knew were disappearing. Finally in April 1939, my parents and my brother left for the U.S. but my in-laws were still in Yugoslavia and we wanted to bring them to safety. Hans' uncle was a very rich man there, he exported timber and we suggested that he send a load to us and then come together with my in-laws. We would sell the timber in Argentina at a good price. His answer was short: "I have not done anything wrong, this is my homeland and nobody will make me leave it." How blind people were! So he stayed, survived the hidden in a cloister, lost everything and later went to Israel where he and his wife died in and Old Age home. My in-laws decided to join us and they arrived on August 28, 1939, three days before the outbreak of the war. Until the last moment we did not know if the Italian ship they were travelling on would make it to Buenos Aires. There is a law that any ship anchored in a foreign harbor because the property of that country at the outbreak of war, and the Brazilians were holding on to the ship.

My in-laws brought a little dog along who would have to stay in quarantine for 6 weeks. We had already learned how to deal with Argentinean authorities and so we went to see the inspector and insinuated that we were prepared to do everything to save that

little dog. He looked at us, nodded, opened the drawer of his desk and turned away. We put some money in the drawer and took Baby home with us.

My father in-law was 68 years old; his wife was 10 years younger. They never worked after joining us. He had been an epileptic for years and at that time there was no medication for it and she had never worked. So we got suddenly two people to care for. They sold many things they had brought, but later depended on renting out rooms in a large apartment and on us.

They did not like the rooming house, they stayed although it was much nicer than ours was and we found a two bedroom, living/dining room apartment which we furnished with the things they had brought in a liftvan. My in-laws had the second bedroom and we slept on two makeshift beds in the living/dining room. We could only go to sleep after everybody had retired and had to get up early, even on Sundays, because my father in-law insisted on having his breakfast at the diningroom table.

We had just started to get some what adjusted to the problem of living in such confined quarters and not having much privacy, when the next problem the us very unexpectedly. My father in-law has a seizure when crossing the street, had been run over by a car and was taken to the hospital. Nursing care in hospitals was bad, furthermore he spoke no Spanish, and I had to stay with him. Why he would start screaming when his wife entered the room, nobody ever found out, but for the 6 weeks he stayed in the hospital, she sat outside his room. He was a difficult patient and it was a full time job, so I had to give up my own job. The morning after he got home he asked me on a nasty tone why I was home and not at work. I never liked him, but they were my husband's parents, we were poor immigrants and so they lived with us for the rest of their lives. He for 8 years, she for 18 years.

I promised my daughter in law that I would never do that to her.

